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ABSTRACT

A laboratory approach to instruction is employed in the basic speech communication course at a southern university. Approximately one-third of the semester is spent on public speaking and performance assignments, while the remainder of the course focuses on interpersonal communication. During the oral performance part of the course, half of the students are frequently excused from class attendance to complete laboratory assignments while the instructor works with the remaining 25 students. The lab was instituted during a period of rapid growth when there were insufficient funds to add several faculty positions to cover the demand for the basic speech course. The laboratory approach allows the department to handle twice as many students with the same number of instructors and sections. The study center coordinator is hired at a lecturer's salary, and the rest of the study center staff consists of undergraduates on work-study salaries. Students purchase a course syllabus that describes 16 self-instructional units on topics such as theories and models, self-disclosure, listening, and nonverbal communication. Students use a variety of media in completing these units, including computers, after which they demonstrate their mastery of one of five objective test forms. When the laboratory work is completed, the coordinator provides the instructor with a record of the students' lab work, which is added to their grades. Among the advantages of the system are the flexibility it provides the instructors with the syllabus units, the flexibility it provides students by being open during the day and the evening, and the individualized instruction of the mastery system. (HTH)

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Increasing Class Size in the Basic Course Through a Laboratory Approach

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SCA Denver, Colorado
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A laboratory approach to instruction is employed in the basic speech communication course at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. Our Speech 1300 course is a hybrid general education course combining interpersonal communication and public speaking. As the course is currently taught, approximately one-third of the semester is spent on public speaking and performance assignments, while the remainder of the course focuses on interpersonal communication. Approximately 50 students are enrolled in each section of the course. During the oral performance part of the course, half of the students are frequently excused from class attendance to complete laboratory assignments. Thus the instructor can work with a class of 25 during oral performances. The students, meanwhile, are listening to the oral performance of half their classmates, and using the remainder of the time for laboratory work.

History of the Speech Laboratory

The lab was instituted during the mid-1970's when enrollment was growing very rapidly at UALR. There were not sufficient funds to add several faculty positions to cover the demand for our basic education course, Speech 1300. The laboratory approach was developed to allow the department to handle twice as many students with the same number of instructors

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and sections. We have one Study Center Coordinator hired at a lecturer's salary. The rest of the Study Center staff consists of undergraduates on work study salaries. The system saves us a minimum of $40,000 a year in salaries.

How the Laboratory Operates

At the beginning of the semester, students purchase a departmentally produced book called, Course Syllabus for Speech Communication. This book describes 16 self-instructional units on topics such as: Theories and Models, Self-Disclosure, Nonverbal Communication, Listening, Pronunciation and Articulation, Vocabulary Development, Semantics, Public Speaking, Public Address, Transactional Analysis, Perception, et cetera.

The Syllabus describes the objectives, procedures, and evaluation methods for each unit. Each instructor has a great deal of flexibility in determining which units to require. Some instructors will require a standard set of units for all students to complete. Other instructors will assess the communication skills of the individuals in their classes (through a self-report form) and will require different units to be completed by each individual student.

Students use a variety of media in completing these units. They may watch videotapes, slide presentations, listen to cassette tapes, read articles on reserve, videotape a speech of their own, or complete a programmed learning text. After they have followed the procedures listed for that unit, students demonstrate their mastery of the material by achieving a passing score on one of five objective test forms covering the contents of the unit. If the students

pass the exam (70% is the cut off score); they can go on to work on the next unit. If they fail the exam, they may work through the unit again and take another examination to demonstrate competency. No record is kept of how often a student fails an exam and a student can continue to work on a unit until he/she passes the examination. As soon as the student has demonstrated competency in all the units required by the instructor, she/he is considered to have completed his/her lab work.

Near the end of the semester, the laboratory coordinator provides the instructors with a list of their students and a record of which units each student has passed. The laboratory work would then be added to the student's grade, along with performance scores, written assignments, and classroom test scores. The laboratory grade accounts for 10-30% of the final grade for the student (depending on the individual instructor and how many units they require).

Flexibility of the Laboratory Approach

Considerable flexibility exits for each instructor in the way he/she might adapt the laboratory to the course. A professor might select four units for the students to complete or ten units. It may free the instructor from lecturing extensively on a particular topic such as communication models, since that material will be covered in the laboratory work. One aspect I appreciate, is the capability to show films/videotapes in the lab. Rather than taking up class time showing films on perception or nonverbal communication, I can simply assign the lab units that include those films.

My students can then watch the films on their own time outside of class. This frees up more time in class for lectures, exercises, and performances.

Flexibility also exists for the students through the laboratory approach. Our speech lab is open from 8:00 a.m. through 8:45 p.m. Monday through Thursday (on Friday we close at 5:00 p.m.). Thus, it is available for students who may have an hour open in their schedule, for students who wish to come in early, or for students enrolled in a night class. Moreover, students can complete their lab assignments as early in the semester as they wish. If an ambitious student wishes to complete all his/her units in the first month, they can do so. Then, when they are given release time later in the semester on performance days, they literally have several days or more of time off from class.

The Future of the Laboratory Approach

We have just purchased five IBM Personal Computers for use in the Study Center. We have also purchased a software package called the "McGraw-Hill Interactive Authoring System" which allows us to create self-instructional units that branch off to the student's level of ability. It also provides more immediate feedback than our current paper and pencil tests.

We hope to develop units tailored to the varying academic levels of students. Currently, we have one set of reading materials or videotapes for all students to use. We hope the CAI (computer assisted instruction) will enable us to prevent bright students from being bored. They will be

able to proceed rapidly to more advanced levels of material on a given topic than we currently have available. This system also has features to help the struggling student. E.g. If a student encounters an unfamiliar word, such as "ambiguous," she/he could branch off to a vocabulary frame that would provide definitions, before continuing on through the unit.

We have a budget request pending for $15,000 to purchase more computers in the laboratory. As the funds become available, we hope to expand our use of CAI in the laboratory.

Advantages of This Approach

There are several advantages to the use of a laboratory in the basic course. 1) A major advantage is that it allows the department to handle twice as many students with the same number of instructors and sections. In times of tight budgets, this system is financially advantageous for the university. 2) Undergraduates will gaining at least minimal exposure to computers through the use of CAI. For many, it is their first exposure to a computer and may stimulate them to seek more computer literacy. 3) The laboratory is open from 8:00 a.m. through 8:45 p.m. Monday through Friday. The hours provide a very flexible schedule for the students seeking to complete units and take tests. 4) Finally, students can retake different forms of a test as many times as they wish until they pass it. This system allows a student to master the material at his or her own rate. This system is preferable to giving in-class tests, which can only be taken once. Under the laboratory system,

more students review material they misunderstood, retake tests, and exit the course with a better grasp of Speech Communication theories.

Abstract

The basic speech course at the U. of Arkansas at Little Rock is a hybrid course. Each section has 50 students. During the performance days, half the class is released to work through self-instructional units in our laboratory. A discussion of CAI (computer assisted instruction) in the Speech Laboratory is also included. We are using "The McGraw-Hill Interactive Authoring System," to create self-instructional units.
The laboratory provides flexibility for both teachers and students. Students may re-take up to 5 different forms of an objective test on any given unit, until they have demonstrated competency in that area.

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